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Strengthening Youth Leadership in a Metropolitan Region: Examining Lessons From a Multiyear Community Foundation Initiative

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Keywords: Youth leadership, community foundations, youth grantmaking, partnerships, regional initiatives, social justice

Key Points

- This article examines the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan's launch of a broad-based, multilayered strategy to promote youth leadership in the region, and showcases what can be accomplished when foundations invest in such strategies.
- In partnership with the University of Michigan School of Social Work and the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University, the foundation helped develop comprehensive programs aimed at building the capacity of youth-serving organizations to engage youth as leaders, support a youth-driven research assessment and social-justice project, and provide funds for youth-run efforts aimed at strengthening the region's schools and communities.
- As a result of the initiative, young people were empowered, organizations strengthened, networks developed, and the promise of youth leadership was demonstrated to the region. Although the full impact of the initiative may take longer to be understood, its success can be seen in the ways the region's young people and organizations, and the foundation itself, now incorporate youth leadership.

Introduction

This article focuses on a case study of a four-year initiative by the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan, undertaken in partnership with the University of Michigan's School of Social Work and the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University, to launch a broad-based, multilayered strategy to promote youth leadership in Southeast Michigan. Through this effort, from 2012 to 2016, the foundation helped develop comprehensive programs aimed at building the capacity of youth-serving organizations to engage youth as leaders, support a youth-driven research assessment and social-justice project, and provide funds for youth-run social-justice projects aimed at strengthening schools and communities across the region.

Foundations have invested in youth leadership in local and regional decision-making over the past 20 years. In Michigan in particular, investing in youth leadership has been an important part of philanthropic practices. Spurred by significant investments by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in the 1980s and 1990s, youth advisory committees (YACs) were developed at most Michigan community foundations as a way to engage the next generation of leaders (Mawby, 1991; Tice, 2004; Falk & Nissan, 2007; Richards-Schuster, 2012). As part of its investment, Kellogg created permanently endowed funds for youth grantmaking at most community foundations and, as a condition of

Building from this history of youth leadership in grantmaking, there is reason to see the potential for community foundations, and foundations more broadly, to devise initiatives aimed at strengthening and transforming youth leadership in communities (Blanchet-Cohen & Cook, 2014). Given this potential, more attention needs to be paid to how community foundations can support youth leadership in metropolitan regions.

accepting the funds, required each foundation to establish a YAC to help guide the grantmaking. By structuring the funding in this way, Kellogg encouraged a commitment to youth leadership in perpetuity across the state. As a result, since 1990 more than 80 Michigan counties have had some form of a YAC.¹

Building from this history of youth leadership in grantmaking, there is reason to see the potential for community foundations, and foundations more broadly, to devise initiatives aimed at strengthening and transforming youth leadership in communities (Blanchet-Cohen & Cook, 2014). Given this potential, more attention needs to be paid to how community foundations can support youth leadership in metropolitan regions.

The Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan was uniquely positioned to do this work. When its YAC was established more than 20 years ago, the foundation chose not only to do youth-driven grantmaking, but also to require that its grantees embed youth leaders in their organizations.

This article draws on multiple data sources: project documents and evaluations, youth survey materials, progress reports, process notes, interviews with participants and organizations, organizational surveys, and self-reflection. It showcases what can be accomplished when foundations invest in broad-based youth-leadership strategies, and highlights lessons learned from a foundation perspective.

Background

Southeast Michigan is a diverse region encompassing seven counties. While it has the large city of Detroit at its core, the region extends to multiple suburban and rural areas and contains the cities of Ann Arbor and Port Huron. Its many historical challenges have included limited transportation and segregation, but new opportunities abound as well: Detroit, for example, has a growing entrepreneurial base and is seeing significant redevelopment. As the region grows and its challenges and opportunities evolve, it becomes more evident to the leadership of the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan that more focus is needed on supporting leadership development across and within communities.

Since its founding in 1984, the foundation has worked to develop innovative approaches for creating change across Southeast Michigan. Its mission is to “promote and facilitate permanent change” in the region’s seven counties² and to “help donors invest in organizations they care about nationwide” (Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, 2016, para. 14). It does so by:

- “Making strategic investments in programs and organizations that benefit the region,”

¹For more information, visit www.michiganfoundations.org.

²Those Southeast Michigan counties are Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Monroe, Washtenaw, Livingston, and St. Clair.

- “Equipping organizations and the public with knowledge and information that will lead to positive change,”
- “Building endowment – community capital – to meet our region’s needs today and tomorrow,” and
- “Providing expert assistance to donors and their advisors in their charitable planning.” (Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, 2016, para. 15-18)

In 2011, the foundation launched an effort to strengthen youth leadership within the metropolitan Detroit region. This initiative was built on the importance of understanding the need for an innovative, social-justice-minded leadership pipeline for Southeast Michigan. To develop a plan for the initiative, the foundation commissioned a scan of youth-leadership programs. This scan revealed a lack of thorough understanding of youth-leadership best practices, and identified a number of areas where improvement was needed:

- more programs that bring young people together across the metropolitan region for ongoing, sustained work,
- support for efforts to develop youth-leadership opportunities at the metropolitan/regional level,
- opportunities to strengthen youth-led programs by building the capacity of young people to use their own ideas to initiate civic-action projects in their communities, and
- capacity-building programming for youth and adults through workshops, education, and training programs; resource development for the region; and opportunities that bring young people and adults together to learn and to strengthen their own work and their potential to work together.

This scan confirmed for the foundation the potential for a broad-based initiative around youth leadership.

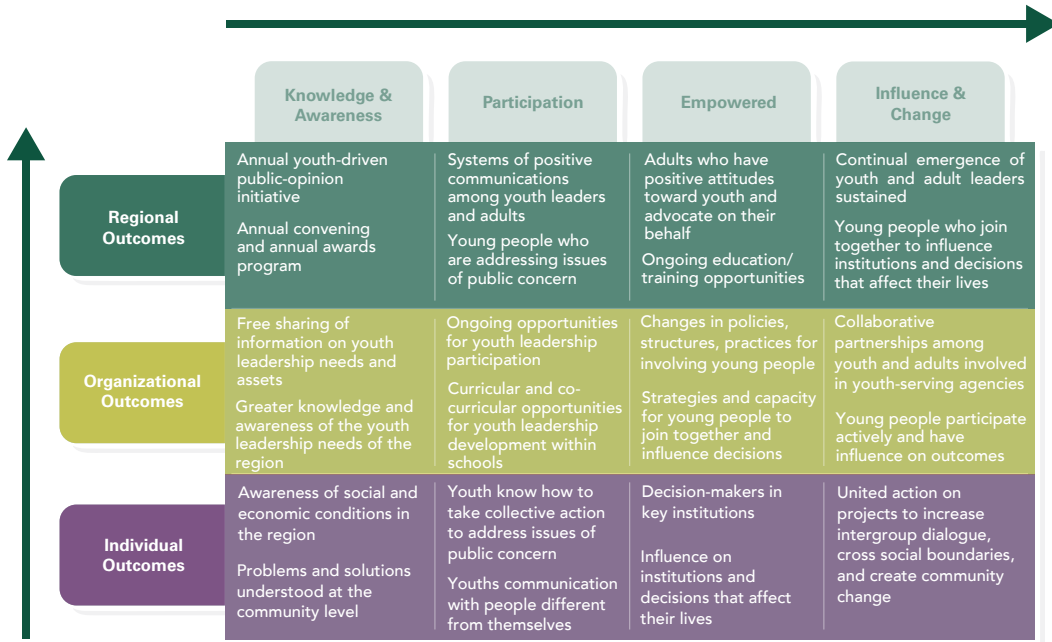
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The initiative was also rooted in the foundation’s history of youth grantmaking. While it has supported this grantmaking with over \$1.3 million invested by the foundation’s YAC in programs by and for youth since the 1990s, there was a desire to strengthen the role of and capacity for youth leadership in the region in a more robust way. Indeed, there was a sense within the foundation of a growing gap in civic leadership that was a serious impediment to the development of Detroit and the region, and that closing the gap meant finding ways to bring young people together across the region, introduce them to the regional issues that need to be addressed, and generally increase the number of youth leaders.

FIGURE 1 Youth Leadership Outcomes

Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan Youth Leadership Outcomes Contium

Increasing the number, quality, and diversity of young leaders in Southeast Michigan



Youth Leadership for a System-Change Framework

Conceptually, the initiative drew on a youth-leadership framework. A youth leadership framework focuses on the active role of young people in organizations and communities, with the assumption that their ideas, voices, and perspectives are critical to a healthy society. Youth-leadership perspectives view young people as having the right and responsibility to engage in institutions that impact their lives, and recognizes that youth are a legitimate source, distinct from adults, of information and ideas for making policy, planning, and program decisions (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Endo, 2002).

Initiatives that prioritize youth leadership focus on the development of young people’s skills, the opportunities for their active leadership and voice in the community, the capacity of adults to work

with young people, and the larger societal understanding about the importance of youth as leaders (O’Brien & Kohlmeier, 2003; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000). This requires understanding that in order to create authentic and meaningful leadership opportunities for young people, organizations need to create a culture where adult board members and staff are committed to supporting and encouraging youth leadership, adults who have the capacity are allied with youth, training and education supports young people, and there are opportunities for youth to engage in and influence civic change.

Regional Youth Initiative

The purpose of the Regional Youth Initiative was to increase the number, quality, and diversity of young leaders in Southeast Michigan. It sought a variety of strategies to achieve this purpose and related outcomes. (See Figure 1.) The goals of the initiative, which was led by a senior program

director and supported by a program officer who was also the foundation's YAC advisor, were to develop youth skills, build organizational capacity, create space for youth voice on issues, and leverage a platform for a larger discussion about the role of youth.

The initiative had three major programmatic components: organizational capacity-building around youth-leadership best practices, regional youth-leadership engagement, and larger regional youth assessment. The foundation approached Kellogg about the concept, and received a grant to further pursue the initiative.

Setting the Stage, Building the Base

The foundation was intentional about broadening its team and knowledge in the development of the initiative. Knowing that it had practice, but not expertise, in youth leadership, the foundation recognized the importance of forming key partnerships with leading experts. Two key organizations – the University of Michigan's School of Social Work and the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University – had worked with the foundation previously and were brought in as consultants and collaborators. The Johnson Center consulted on developing organizational capacity and skill-building strategies for youth-serving organizations in the region. The U-M School of Social Work, along with Michigan's Children, a nonprofit policy-advocacy organization, worked on developing a youth regional assessment, a regional youth council, and a youth-led social-justice grants program. These strategic partnerships helped guide and inform the work.

Elements of Work

The Regional Youth Initiative was implemented over four years, from 2012 to 2016. While much of the work is complete, aspects of the project are still being carried out as of this writing and the initiative's impact continues to be felt. The initiative contained four main elements:

1. capacity-building workshops,
2. a regional youth assessment,
3. development of a social-justice regional grants program, and
4. regional discussions about the role of youth.

Capacity-Building Workshops

Beginning in 2012, the foundation worked with the Johnson Center to design a series of workshops for select youth-serving organizations providing youth-leadership and youth-development services in Southeast Michigan; most of these organizations had been foundation grantees. The process was informed and vetted by a range of youth-serving organizations and by young people themselves.

These workshops were aimed at building awareness among youth-serving organizations, developing skills, and helping foster a regional network of youth-serving organizations. Through seminars, peer-group learning labs, and individual coaching, the workshops encouraged the establishment of a regional cohort of youth-serving organizations that demonstrates best practices for managing effective programs. The four daylong sessions and two peer-group learning labs drew participation from more than 200 adults and youth from over 60 youth-serving nonprofits across the region.

The workshops focused on select topics: cultivating youth in organizational leadership and decision-making, strengthening evaluation strategies, strengthening communication strategies through storytelling, and developing sustainable funding. Each workshop featured national and local experts. As an incentive for participation, the foundation offered a free, one-on-one coaching session by the Johnson Center to organizations that attended all four trainings. This coaching was one of the most well-received workshop components; more than 90 hours of one-on-one coaching focused on individualized needs was delivered to 21 organizations.

Regional Youth Assessment

A second element of the initiative, built directly from the youth-leadership framework, involved a participatory assessment of regional needs

A second element of the initiative, built directly from the youth-leadership framework, involved a participatory assessment of regional needs developed by and for young people. This component – initially characterized as “taking the pulse of the region” – was led by the U-M School of Social Work and involved a team known as the Metropolitan Youth Policy Fellows. The team was made up of about a dozen high school-age youth recruited through community organizations; many had been involved with Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in Metropolitan Detroit, a social-justice youth-leadership program sponsored by the School of Social Work.

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Detroit, a social-justice youth-leadership program sponsored by the School of Social Work (Checkoway, 2009).

The MYPF met regularly, starting in September 2012, to discuss a participatory assessment process. The fellows began by identifying key topics and issues in their communities – health, transportation, diversity, education, safety, and youth participation, roles, and opportunities. After discussing the topics and researching earlier youth assessments, the team narrowed the scope of the questions and decided to draft a survey.

The MYPF recognized the importance of network development in reaching its goal of 1,000 completed surveys. Young people spent a significant amount of time brainstorming on multiple levels within their own networks to generate lists of other youth they could reach. In the end, more than 1,100 young people across the region completed surveys.

After analyzing the surveys, the MYPF conducted focus groups to delve into key issues. The team then compiled the findings, developed themes, prepared recommendations and, ultimately, decided to create a video report to document its findings and share ideas with key stakeholders. The fellows also wrote a report, “Listen to Youth,” which detailed their findings and recommendations,³ including expanded opportunities for all youth and for youth leadership, healthier and safe communities for young people, and greater diversity within and across communities.

Youth Social Justice Summit and Youth Voice Grants

A third element of the initiative was a youth summit and grantmaking process. In response to the MYPF recommendations, the foundation used some of the funding from Kellogg to fund a one-time Youth Voice Social Justice Grants program to support youth from the region in developing their own “big ideas” for creating change.

³To read the full report and view the video, see <https://cfsem.org/media/youth-voices-for-social-justice-survey-results/>

FIGURE 2 Youth Voice Summit

The foundation worked with the MYPF to create a request for proposals. The youths' perspective shaped the overall grant proposal, including the idea of proposals on video in addition to written proposals. This was something the foundation had an interest in piloting, and the young people involved thought the grantmaking program would be a good vehicle.

To help launch the grantmaking process, the MYPF and foundation staff organized a regional youth summit for the fall of 2014. (See Figure 2.) Youth teams from the region, identified primarily via the 60 organizations that had participated in the trainings in the first phase of the initiative, were invited; 120 young people from more than 20 organizations and schools attended the summit. Using a peer-to-peer workshop style, the MYPF and the U-M team engaged youth in strategizing about their ideas, developing their plans, and generating ideas for "pitching" on video. Adult advisors were given resources and support from foundation program staff to help them understand the proposal process. Teams left with workbooks to help them move, step by step, from ideas to a proposal.

The proposals had a one-month due date from the summit – October 2015. It was a quick turnaround, but the goal was to get projects going by the following December, so that students

⁴For details, see <https://cfsem.org/media/community-foundation-awards-150000-to-organizations-across-the-region-to-benefit-youth/>

FIGURE 3 Youth Grantee Convenings

who were in their junior or senior years of high school would participate in the lives of the projects, if funded. The grants, ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000, were for one-year projects that would help create change in response to the survey findings. The MYPF and YAC members gave feedback and recommendations on the project proposals, and \$150,000 was granted to 18 youth-led projects.⁴

Six of the seven counties served by the foundation were represented in the funded projects, including programs to improve quality of life in local communities, increase youth leadership in nonprofit and school-based organizations, engage young people in social-justice issues in their schools, and involve young people in leadership in the region. (See Table 1.)

After the grants were awarded, the foundation held a series of networking and capacity-building workshops for the grantees in collaboration with the U-M School of Social Work and the MYPF. The goal of these workshops was to build the youths' engagement and leadership skills, enhance team and project development, and help organizations see one another as resources and as members of a regional network focused on strengthening youth voice. Workshops also used a peer-driven model in which youth grantees shared their work, helped one another troubleshoot challenges, and brainstormed ways to share their work. These workshops also helped to support the adult ally at each organization through the life of the project. (See Figure 3.)

TABLE 1 List of Youth Voice Grantee Projects

Sponsor	Project
Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center Inc.	An LGBT youth group that strengthens youth voice in the organization
Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services	The Dearborn Youth Empowerment Initiative, to promote race and ethnicity dialogue
Boys and Girls Clubs of Oakland and Macomb Counties	A teen leadership summit and community-service action plan for youth
City of Port Huron	A youth plan to reconstruct two city basketball courts
Community Social Services for Wayne County	"Potluck Discussions" to build life skills for homeless teen mothers and their children
Corner Health Center & Ozone House	Support for Ypsilanti youth in sharing concerns and finding solutions with community leaders
Dearborn Public Schools	A social-justice course for juniors and seniors at Edsel Ford High School
East Michigan Environment Action Council	Workshops to raise awareness of environmental and climate-justice issues for youth in Detroit
Farmington Public Schools	Support for Farmington Central High School students to build communication skills to address diversity issues
Farmington Public Schools	Diversity-focused activities at Farmington, Harrison, and North Farmington high schools
River Raisin National Battlefield Park Foundation	Incorporating Wyandotte Nation's history into a youth-led kayak program
SER Metro-Detroit Jobs for Progress Inc.	A one-day conference to build relationships between youth and adults across metro Detroit
Student Conservation Association Inc.	Establishment of a youth alumni council to help launch a year-round leadership program
James and Grace Lee Boggs School	An intergenerational community mentoring program
University Prep Math & Science High School	A student-exchange program with other schools in the region to build cultural awareness

The final workshop, in February 2016, celebrated the work of the grants through a project summit and showcase. Teams developed presentations on the impact of the projects on their members, their schools, and their communities. Foundation leaders discussed future resources and provided

support for projects in developing the next steps. All youth leaders received certificates for participating, and each team received a framed certificate for their organization. While the funding officially ended in December 2015, many of the projects have continued through new funding,

leveraging of new resources, or through creating sustainable structures for youth voice (e.g., youth councils or institutionalized youth programs). Furthermore, the foundation's relationships with the adult allies ensure continued conversations about youth leadership beyond this youth cohort.

Regional Awareness-Building

The fourth element of the initiative was creating a larger awareness and discussion about the role of youth in the region. In many ways this was the least independently programmed element of the initiative, as the ideas around raising the importance of youth voice were embedded across the other three elements: Each workshop for youth contributed to building youth voice. Each MYPF meeting with other young people raised awareness. Workshops built capacity across organizations and among youth. Each grant helped to educate specific organizations and communities about why youth voice matters. Networking and engagement helped create a new regional synergy.

However, there were also intentional activities and a communication strategy focused on raising awareness across the region. The communication strategy was aimed at connecting key community leaders to the project and raising general awareness through the media. This was done, in part, through presentations to Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan board members and discussions with other foundations in the region. The foundation also built a web page dedicated to the project, which became an organized way to share the MYPF's written report and video, photos, and other materials.⁵ The foundation commissioned a short video about the project and its outcomes that is featured on the website, along with fact sheets written by the MYPF about strategies for strengthening youth voice aimed at youth, adults, and policymakers.

One highlight of the strategy emerged from an idea for a bold way to foster regional discussion around the role of youth. Building on a long-time partnership, the foundation and Detroit

FIGURE 4 Detroit Public Television



Building on a longtime partnership, the foundation and Detroit Public Television worked with the University of Michigan on a concept for a televised town hall with an audience of the Metropolitan Youth Policy Fellows and youth grantees to raise awareness of the power and potential of youth leadership.

Public Television (DPTV) worked with the University of Michigan on a concept for a televised town hall with an audience of the MYPF and youth grantees to raise awareness of the power and potential of youth leadership. (See Figure 4.) The conversation featured foundation President Mariam Noland; Detroit civic leader Joseph L. Hudson Jr.; Aaron Dworkin, dean of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre, & Dance; *Detroit Free Press* editorial page editor Stephen Henderson; and four young people: Metropolitan Youth Policy Fellows Abhijay Kumar and Meaghan Wheat and YOUth Voice social-justice grant project participants Kiristen Hubbard-Curry, of the Corner Health

⁵See <https://cfsem.org/initiative/youth-voice-for-social-justice/>

To have an impact, any initiative specifically aimed at youth leadership must prioritize the voices and engagement of young people. In this case, the initiative was informed at every stage by young people. The initial concept for the project was linked to the foundation's experience with YAC members, and the University of Michigan's MYPF team helped drive the development of the information, which informed the social-justice grants project and formed the basis for larger regional discussions.

Center, and Harmony Rhodes, of Detroit's University Prep Science & Math High School. The town hall aired twice on DPTV and created a buzz that initiated further discussion across the foundation network and the region.

Initiative Evaluation

The initiative engaged in broad-based evaluation to document project findings; it included program surveys and reports, project documentation, pre- and post-evaluation of youth leaders, grantee evaluation surveys, youth and adult interviews, and grantee site visits. Initial evaluations demonstrated that the project impacted the youth involved and the organizations. An adult ally with a grantee organization reported:

I personally enjoyed working with our youth and preparing them for the conference. It was a learning tool for me as I stood back and guided the youth on their decision-making. The youth learned a lot about themselves from the conference. They also learned about the importance of getting the work done [and gained] specific skills such as public speaking. In addition, I enjoyed [their] feedback on the conference. I remember one of them saying, "We are the future and we are the ones who can create change."

Another observed that the young people:

[H]ave grown in ways that I did not even anticipate. The youth who planned and executed this project have become leaders at their schools and across the community. The success of writing for this grant motivated them to pursue others. They have begun to develop diversity projects and take on full ownership of the projects without asking for much support. A few have taken on projects across metro Detroit. I see that they are all more empowered, confident, and energized.

Grantees also said they saw changes in their organizations and in the community:

I feel that while I have been a huge advocate for youth voice and action, this project allowed our entire secondary staff to understand and value these things in a way they had not done previously. From administration to teachers to support staff, I saw the adults in the organization begin to shift their attitudes of sarcasm and skepticism to ones of hope and belief in our students.

The Summit [a project funded by the grant] had the highest attendance of neighborhood members. ... The successful turnout was attributed to [youth] canvassing the neighborhood during the weeks leading up to the event. [They] personally invited the neighbors by passing out fliers attached to Better Made chips with the slogan, "We are better when we come together." The event allowed for the fostering of more meaningful relationships between the neighborhood and the school.

Lessons Learned for Foundations

Among the many lessons from a foundation perspective learned from this experience, six key insights emerged:

The Essential Voice of Youth

To have an impact, any initiative specifically aimed at youth leadership must prioritize the voices and engagement of young people. In this case, the initiative was informed at every stage by young people. The initial concept for the project was linked to the foundation's experience with YAC members, and the University of Michigan's MYPF team helped drive the development of the information, which informed the social-justice grants project and formed the basis for larger regional discussions.

Most important, the MYPF served as a catalyst for the project. The youth team's work helped shape the direction of the project, from the use of social-justice language to the development of the youth-led grants format to the networking and collaboration components. Young people's voices and ideas were taken seriously. The MYPF survey video, for example, was a helpful tool in communicating the value of the project – not merely the results of the survey, but the importance of letting youth lead.

Engaging youth voice authentically is also key to success. The ability of young people to tell their stories – about the region, their projects, and their communities – helped to engage adults. When adults hear young people's ideas and understand what they need, it is more compelling than when adults merely talk about what they think young people need. Similarly, when young people see their peers stepping forward and taking action, it helps create a platform for engagement. They begin to understand what is possible and relate to others who care about their schools and communities. We saw this through the powerful ways the MYPF work resonated with young people, and the ways in which they shared their learning with others.

Partnerships With Subject-Matter Experts

This initiative highlighted the importance of ongoing partnerships. Given the scope and multilayered nature of the work, it was important for the foundation to bring in key partners who were subject-area experts to consult with and implement specific elements for different phases of the

project. Although the program partners – the University of Michigan and the Johnson Center – were awarded grants for their components of the initiative, they functioned as team members alongside foundation staff. While the foundation stepped back to enable each partner to provide expertise, there were many opportunities for discussion and engagement on all aspects of the initiative and the foundation and its partners worked as a team to implement it. For the youth elements, it was critical to have a core staff member who worked directly with the MYPF to support the youth, engage their voice, and provide a feedback loop from the young people to the foundation staff.

In addition to strong relationships within the core team, it was important for the foundation to build such relationships with all the organizations involved in the project, and to provide the adult allies on the projects with technical grant support. For many youth organizations, these were not “typical” grants – the adults were not the ones responsible for program implementation and results – and foundation staff provided reassurance that this youth-led approach was, in fact, intended.

Buy-In From Organizational and Initiative Leadership

A multilayered youth-leadership initiative requires support and buy-in at every level. At the end of the day, the foundation needed to be the one to support the concept, help market the ideas, provide the resources, and create the leverage for the broader discussion. The initiative could fully develop because of its multiple layers of support. It required commitment from the board as well as from the foundation's president and senior leadership. It helped that the initiative was launched by a senior director of the foundation and supported strongly by the vice president for program. In addition, two program officers served as champions at various stages. It is evidence of the foundation's commitment and buy-in that the program was presented multiple times to the board and to program committees, and that the foundation's president and a founding board member participated in the DPTV town hall.

Young people invited one another to their own project events in ways that would not have happened prior to the initiative. A group of youth from Detroit, for example, invited other youth grantee recipients and the MYPF to speak at its youth-adult partnership summit. It is evident that creating opportunities for youth to be in a space together was important.

Because the project engaged young people's ideas, many elements of the project developed organically. As a result, there was need for ongoing support for the project and, at each stage of development, buy-in from the various stakeholders. Youth organizations and adult staff members had to be willing to engage young people locally. This project also needed young people to buy into the concept, the approach, and every other aspect. The initiative would not have succeeded without the engagement of young people; their buy-in depended on their belief in the project's authenticity and their understanding of their role.

Capacity Building

Another takeaway from this initiative was the importance of capacity building. While foundation programs often focus on individual projects and impacts, this initiative focused on multiple levels and layers, and sought to make regional change. Using a systems and youth leadership perspectives framework requires thinking beyond individual projects to the roots of long-term change. In this case, it necessitated understanding what was needed to encourage young people to step forward as leaders, and what was needed to

help organizations take the next step in systematically engaging youth. Capacity-building workshops and activities targeted at young people and organizations became critical to providing that support and skill-development opportunities.

A secondary component of the capacity-building effort was creating a network for youth and youth-serving organizations to continue the work. While building networks and collaborations is not always what foundations "normally do," it was important to realize that an initiative focused on building youth leadership across a region was going to require new connections, and new opportunities for individuals and organizations to connect. The ability of the young people to share their ideas, workshop their proposals, and receive feedback on their progress led to better projects. For example, two organizations ended up collaborating after they realized they had similar ideas for a project. That project led to a citywide research effort to promote youth engagement – something that was of a bigger scope and broader scale than either group would have taken on alone. At the final youth summit, we observed young people talking through next steps and sharing ideas for future projects.

Creating Sustainable Networks

Throughout the initiative, the organizations and the youth used their connections to develop their own networking. Young people invited one another to their own project events in ways that would not have happened prior to the initiative. A group of youth from Detroit, for example, invited other youth grantee recipients and the MYPF to speak at its youth-adult partnership summit. It is evident that creating opportunities for youth to be in a space together was important.

This was also true for the youth organizations that found peer-to-peer networks to be the most important components of capacity building. While it was important that the networks be peer-driven, it was also important for the foundation to create the space for organizations to initially be involved. From the outset, it also worked to ensure this was a regional effort, putting in extra effort at the beginning to cast

a wide net for invitees to the initial trainings. This early work paid off: six of the region's seven counties were ultimately engaged in the project's Youth Voice grantmaking component. The foundation's leadership believed strongly that if we were truly going to break down racial and economic barriers, we needed to include youth leaders from across the region. It was exciting to see how that inclusion made a difference in the work, primarily because of one-on-one relationships built between the youth and the adult allies, which will in turn help in addressing regional needs in the long term.

Wide-Ranging Impact of Youth Leadership

While this project was focused specifically on youth leadership, it is critical to note its impact beyond the youth and youth programs. Although the impact of this project may continue to unfold, it is important to recognize the ways it is helping shape the discussion within organizations, the region, and the foundation.

Project evaluations found that the broader value of youth engagement was recognized region-wide. Many of the grantee organizations talked about how the intentional involvement of the youth voice impacted their organizations and the community. One grantee noted the positive impact overall: "It helped the program take a positive turn ... [and] gave us an opportunity to have a better understanding of the type of groups that were actually needed to better the environment at the facility."

For the foundation, the project had multiple impacts. It has helped inform ongoing YAC efforts by expanding the networks of youth organizations and raising awareness about the role of the youth voice. The project also had an unexpected impact on the foundation's operations by showcasing the potential for using technology and online resources. While the foundation had been testing the use of videos for grant proposals, this project was the first pilot for such technology. The ability to communicate information through the website, social media, and online materials helped connect more organizations and more young people to the project.

As a result, the foundation is prepared to use technology in more creative ways.

Most importantly, the foundation is being thoughtful about making sure the youth perspective continues to be meaningfully welcomed to the table on a number of community topics and discussions. At this writing, the foundation is looking to launch a scan around regional youth sports and will make sure two youth leaders are part of the task force overseeing the project. As with any inclusionary work, it is important to understand community challenges from a number of vantage points if we are to find meaningful ways of addressing those challenges.

Conclusion

As a result of the Regional Youth Initiative, young people were empowered, organizations were strengthened, networks were developed, and the promise of youth leadership was demonstrated to the region. Although its impact may take longer to be fully understood, the initiative's success can be seen in the ways that the region's young people, organizations, and the foundation itself now incorporate youth leadership.

Foundations are poised to be leaders of regional efforts to engage youth. They can build capacity, provide leverage, and help highlight key ideas. While this initiative was grander in scale, elements of the project can be scaled up or down; in many ways, the lower-cost components of the initiative – youth involvement, network development, peer-to-peer engagement – provided the most valuable lessons.

Foundations and regional decision-makers have much to learn from youth and their efforts. As this initiative suggests, young people have good ideas about improving their communities and they need opportunities to have their voices heard. When organizations can create the platforms for youth involvement – and foundations can help provide the support for those efforts – young people, organizations, and the region will be strengthened.

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